

Marketing Ethnic Crops by Commercial Growers in Massachusetts

Final Report June 29, 2005

I. Outline of the issue

The immigrant population in the United States has been rising in recent years. The percentage of immigrants in the United States is higher than it has been since 1930 and the total population of immigrants is estimated to be close to thirty-five million people. In Massachusetts, it is estimated that over 115,000 immigrants have arrived in Massachusetts since 2000 (Center for Immigration Studies).

These immigrant groups want to eat fresh fruits and vegetables that are part of their culture which matches the needs of farmers who are searching for new marketing options, especially for direct sales and high-value crops. Direct sales, with a focus on specialty crops, may enable farmers to increase and stabilize their incomes in face of widening national and global competition in production of conventional food products. Consumers also benefit from more readily available, reasonably priced, fresh produce that is culturally appropriate.

The goal of this project was to work with Asian immigrant and other commercial growers in Massachusetts to develop a strategy for direct marketing of locally-grown products to targeted markets. This was done via market product research, implementation, and education. The focus of this strategy was Asian and Brazilian markets in Massachusetts and the region.

II. Description of Activities:

A. Identify Crops.

Research and extension activities undertaken by UMass Extension have identified many crops that can be grown and marketed successfully in the Northeast. The following crops were identified as potential crops that could be grown by cooperating growers for Brazilian and Asian markets:

- Brazilian: collards, jiló, maxixe, pumpkin (aboóbora), and zuchinni
- Asian: bok choy, yu choy, water spinach, and bitter melon

Information on these crops can be found at a website developed and maintained by UMass Extension: www.worldcrops.org

B. Identify commercial growers to produce these crops.

The focus of this project was to develop wholesale markets for commercial growers. In meeting with immigrant farmers, and agricultural professionals who work with these immigrant growers, it was decided that these growers didn't have the necessary infrastructure to produce and deliver high quality produce to targeted markets. This project planned on renting a refrigerated truck to allow immigrant growers to deliver produce to the identified markets, but there were concerns that these growers did not possess the packaging, post-harvest handling, or communication skills to successfully supply the identified markets.

This project worked with four commercial farmers and a grower-owned cooperative.

C. Canvass Ethnic Markets in Massachusetts and Eastern Region

Ethnic stores in the communities known to have large populations of Brazilians and Asians were canvassed by project personnel. A Brazilian and an Asian marketing liaison were hired to help with the research on the ethnic markets. Their knowledge of the language and culture of these groups proved invaluable in identifying ethnic markets and crop needs in their respective communities.

We developed an individual marketing plan with each farmer detailing the projected market, area and distribution. This was done by organizing meetings between farmers and potential buyers of these crops. Constant communication and follow-up by community liaisons was key to making this work.

Here is a brief summary on activities relevant to Brazilian and Asian markets:

Brazilian markets:

The marketing focus was placed on the ethnic wholesalers, ethnic stores, chain stores and ethnic restaurants. Market Basket/DeMoulas is a large supermarket chain known to have a large immigrant customer base with many stores in Massachusetts. Over ten stores of this chain were visited by project personnel. After initial visits, meetings with the

produce managers were organized to discuss details. Deliveries to this chain store were made by a grower cooperative based in Western Massachusetts, the Pioneer Valley Growers Association (PVGA). One of the cooperating growers shipped through this grower cooperative. Project personnel visited the stores as the produce was delivered to educate produce managers on display and handling of the produce.

We developed a wholesale marketing relationship between one of the cooperating farmers and a Portuguese-speaking chain store with stores in Massachusetts, New Jersey and Florida. We organized a meeting with the chains' general manager in New Jersey who was extremely interested in the project and the crops. This resulted in significant purchases of Brazilian crops by a cooperating grower.

In addition, project personnel sold product produced by cooperating growers at a Brazilian Festival in New York City in September of 2004. Almost \$2,000 worth of product was sold.

Asian markets

We developed a relationship between the largest Asian supermarket chain in Massachusetts and the PVGA. Samples of Chinese cabbage, bok choy, and mint produced by the Pioneer Valley Growers Association (PVGA) were delivered to this chain store. Business was conducted, between the two parties and the results were over \$7,000.00 worth of business for the grower cooperative. This proved to be a good outlet for farmers overflow production during the peak season.

In addition, smaller Asian and Brazilian Ethnic stores were also canvassed in Worcester, Springfield, Lynn, Chelsea, Somerville, Lowell, Somerville. Sales were not made with these stores due to the difficulty of delivering small amounts of produce to many different stores.

D. Development of Marketing Materials

i. Brochure in English and Portuguese

A brochure detailing the crops available for the Portuguese-speaking communities and when they would be available for deliveries to the stores was produced. This brochure was used when meeting with store owners and produce managers. Originally brochures were going to be produced in other languages, but since the main focus of the project was with Portuguese-speaking markets, only these two languages were targeted. These are available on the web (umassvegetable.org; under “new growers”).

ii. TV commercial:

A commercial for a Brazilian cable network was produced. This commercial showed the products being produced by local growers and emphasized that they were locally grown and would be found in local markets. Staff was also interviewed on a Brazilian program entitled *Planeta Brasil*.

iii. Flyers

Flyers in English and Portuguese were produced and distributed for individual farms.

III. Impacts

A. Number of Markets canvassed

Brazilian crops: Over 30 markets in Somerville, Lynn, Chelsea, Everett, Tewksbury, Salem, Framingham, Ashland, Lowell, Peabody, Taunton, Cambridge, Dorchester, New York, New Jersey and New Hampshire.

Asian Markets: More than 20 markets in Dorchester, Worcester, Lowell, Boston, and New York City.

B. Number of Growers who received information about the implementations and results of this project

Over 300 commercial growers received information on this project from in-person contacts, newsletters, and talks by project personnel.

C. Commercial on Brazilian Cable Station:

We received over 200 phone and email requests for the crops produced by local growers due to this commercial. Requests for the produce were directed to the area supermarkets and ethnic stores. Since this cable station is received by Brazilians throughout the country, we also received calls and emails from states such as Montana, Louisiana, Georgia California and Nevada. We experimented with mail-ordering these products, but without the infrastructure in place and pre-season planning we found it didn't work.

IV. Evaluation

Three of the four cooperating farmers and the manager of the PVGA were interviewed in the fall on all aspects of this project. All farmers benefited financially from this effort and all will grow these products again in the coming season; however, some will grow much less.

The farmer that was primarily wholesale benefited the greatest from this project. This farm was set up to deliver high-quality produce with good packaging that the market accepted very readily. The other farmers, who are more retail-oriented, had some difficulties competing with this larger farmer. This caused them to have much lower sales than they expected.

Prices for these products were very high in the beginning of the season and then began to fall as more was produced by the four growers. This increased competition caused some of the growers not sell as much as they had hoped. Some of the connections that we set up for individual growers fell apart as individual markets began to negotiate directly with individual growers.

The Pioneer Valley Growers Association (PVGA) developed a relationship with a very large Asian supermarket chain. Although sales were modest this first year, they hope and expect these sales to increase in the future.